

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE FROM THE EXCAVATIONS AT SKIPPER'S RIDGE, (N40/7), OPITO, COROMANDEL PENINSULA

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Abstract. Three recently found representative cross-sections of the excavations at Skipper's Ridge in 1959 and 1960 are presented and their significance discussed.

Since the publication of a report on the excavations at Skipper's Ridge in 1959-60 (Davidson 1975), several cross-sections have been discovered in the Anthropology Department, University of Otago. Their discussion here is intended as a supplement to the previous report and should, if possible, be read in conjunction with it.

The statement in the previous report, that the original field drawings of stratigraphic sections of the excavations from May 1959 onwards were missing, remains correct. The recently discovered drawings are representative cross-sections, redrawn at a large scale ($2\frac{1}{2}$ inches = 1 foot) (63.5 mm = 0.3048 m) at some stage after the completion of the excavations. The cross-sections have been arbitrarily numbered as follows: Cross-section 1, A - A¹; Cross-section 2, B - B¹; Cross-section 3, C - C¹. Cross-section 1 appears to date from an early stage in the excavations, probably May 1959; the other two, because of their positions, probably derive from the final excavations in the summer of 1959-1960.

The positions of the three sections are shown on the plan of structures uncovered during the excavations (Fig. 1). The redrawn sections are illustrated in Fig. 2. Cross-sections 2 and 3 have been related to the site datum. Although there is no precise means of checking the datum of Cross-section 1 from the evidence available, it is probably approximately the same as the site datum.

THE CROSS-SECTIONS

Cross-section 1 represents the west face of square D7, one of the two original test squares. It is labelled "Section along W side from S-N Square 7D". The use of the form 7D rather than the later D7 shows that this section derives from an early stage in the excavations. This is supported by the fact that the occupation I pit D, through which the section runs, is defined but not fully excavated. The original test square in January 1959 was taken down to this point, but as the records of that excavation were retained by Golson, I assume that this section derives from the reopening of the square in May 1959. It is interesting that a 10-foot (3.05 m) rather than a 9-foot (2.7 m) square is suggested. This may be

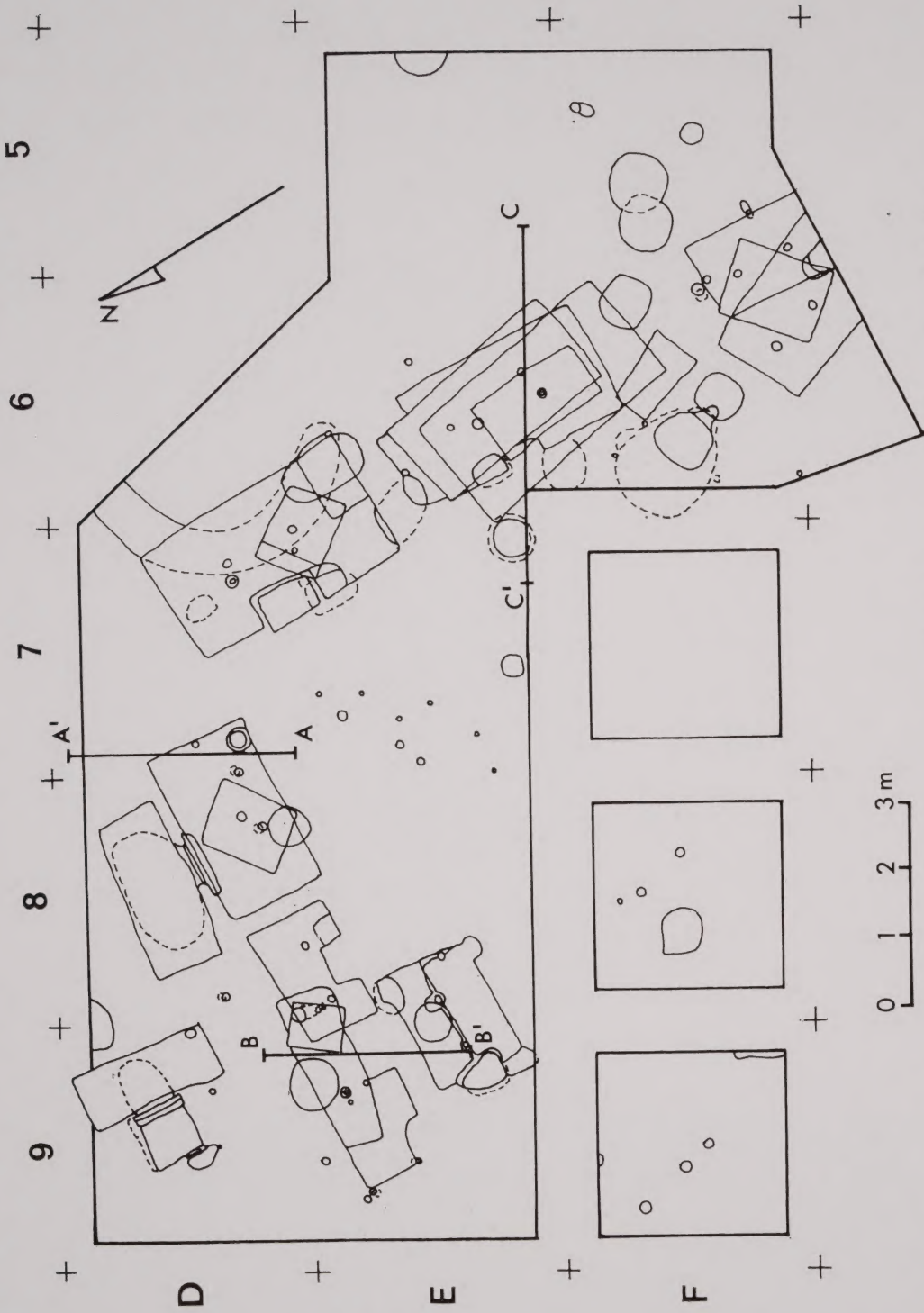


Fig. 1. Plan of excavated structures at Skipper's Ridge, N40/7, showing positions of cross-sections. Cross-section 1, A - A', Cross-section 2, B - B', Cross-section 3, C - C'.

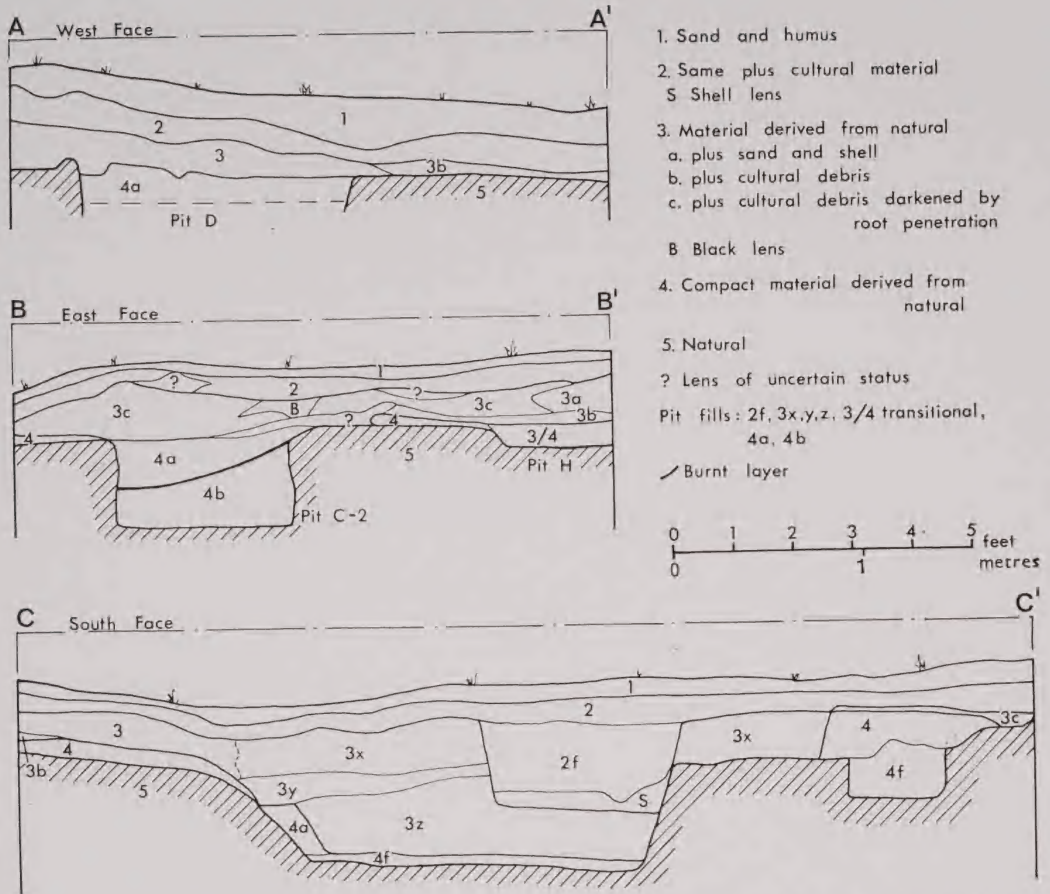


Fig. 2. Three cross-sections, Skipper's Ridge, N40/7. Cross-section 1, A - A' along West face of square D7. Cross-section 2, B - B' along East face of part squares D9 to E9. Cross-section 3 C - C' along South face of part squares E5 to E7.

an error either in the original drawing or in the redrawing; however, the position and dimension of pit D on the section conforms best with a hypothetical 10-foot square within the 12-foot (3.7 m) site grid.

The stratigraphy in this area is relatively simple and the layers in the section agree with written descriptions of this part of the site. Layer 4 appears only in the fill of the pit, which is sealed by layer 3. The stratigraphy here is similar to that in the previously published section across pit E in the south-east corner of the same square (Davidson 1975, fig. 1), except that the layers are thicker, remarkably so in the case of layer 1. This may be due to the difficulty of distinguishing the boundary between layers 1 and 2.

Cross-section 2 represents part of the east face of squares D9 and E9 after the removal of the intervening baulk. It is actually labelled "Section east to west across pit complex of Squares E5-E6", but it is obvious from a comparison with the plan of structures that the labels of Cross-sections 2 and 3 have been reversed. There is a slight inaccuracy in that the distance between the two pits on the section is greater than that indicated on the plan.

This section, which bisects pit C-2 and part of pit H, unfortunately misses the complex intersection of C-2, C-3 and G, and consequently throws no light on the interpretation of pit C as a whole. Several important points emerge, however. Both pit C-2 and the northern part of pit H were cut through remnants of layer 4 and sealed by layer 3, here a rather complex deposit with several components. The small lens of layer 4 visible in the section between the two pits is one edge of a thicker remnant, whose extent is marked on the original plan. This remnant shows clearly in several black and white photographs. The extreme shallowness of pit H is therefore partly due to subsequent truncation of that part of its walls not formed by the natural. An original depth of rather more than 1 foot (30 cm) for pit H is probable.

The infilling of pit C-2 is illustrated both in this section and in several black and white photographs of the north face of square E9 both before and during the removal of the E9-D9 baulk. In these photographs, the burned layer shown on Cross-section 2 is clearly visible, sloping down from east to west. It seems that this pit was filled originally from the south-east or east, and completely filled and levelled after the burning episode.

Cross-section 3 (originally labelled "Section N-S across pit complex of squares D9-E9) represents the south face of part of squares E5-E7. It is one of the key sections of the site as it bisects the complex series of pits F, K, L and S, as well as one of the occupation I "potholes". A coloured slide of part of this section, taken by H. J. R. Brown, shows that the differences between layers in the pit fills were minimal, so that the pits themselves were very difficult to define. It is therefore not surprising that there are some slight discrepancies between the boundaries of features on the section and on the plan.

One of the earliest features in this part of the site, if not the earliest, is the occupation I "pothole" in the south of E7, which is sealed by a large remnant of layer 4, possibly derived from the original digging of pit F. The relationship of the occupation I buttress pit F to layer 4, however, is not clear, owing to the intrusion of the later pits attributed to occupation III (layer 3).

The general sequence of pit construction in this area is the same as that previously reported. A relatively large deep pit was dug and subsequently filled with layer 4; a slightly shallower pit on a slightly different alignment was dug in the same place, removing much of the layer 4 fill, and in its turn filled with layer 3. Into the top of this a large shallow feature was dug, which nowhere penetrated the natural, but was dug partly into layer 4, and partly into the earlier of the layer 3 deposits. This in turn was filled with layer 3. Finally, a smaller pit was dug in the same area and filled, after which the build-up of layers 2 and 1 completed the sequence. The problem is to reconcile the boundaries of the pits, as shown on the section, with those given on the plan. The section suggests that the east wall of pit F (occupation I) at this point lay further to the east than that of pit K (occupation III). In the plan, however, the reverse is the case. This could suggest that pit K, a rectangular pit without buttress, is earlier than the buttress pit F. However, the otherwise consistent evidence that the buttress pits are the earliest features on the site, suggests that the confusion has arisen from the great difficulty of precisely determining the boundaries of individual features in this complex part of the site.

Confidence in the existence of pit L is not increased by this section. Its walls were evidently clear where it was cut into layer 4 (on the west and south sides) and unclear where it merged with widespread layer 3 deposits. On the evidence of this section, its status as a pit seems doubtful. On the other hand, pit S, assigned by Parker to layer 2 (occupation IV), is more definite. Although it is certainly the latest pit in this part of the site, it appears to precede the main accumulation of layer 2, and may thus be the last occupation III feature, rather than a true occupation IV feature.

DISCUSSION

The sections, in my view, support the idea of continuity between occupations I, II and III. Parker defined both layer 4 and layer 3 as redeposited natural with greater (layer 3) or lesser (layer 4) amounts of cultural material incorporated. Subdivisions of both layers were defined; but these all appear to represent material derived from the digging of pits and perhaps other features, and mixed with increasing amounts of cultural debris resulting from occupation on the site.

The problems of association of artifacts and midden from the site with structural features are emphasised by the sections. For example, material from layers 4b and 4a in the fill of pit C-2, as illustrated in Cross-section 2, is stratigraphically later than material from layer 4, through which the pit was cut. However, the original context of items found in pit fills must always be uncertain. Similarly, the original contexts of material found in the various layer 3 fills and deposits illustrated in Cross-section 3 are unknown, and it is quite probable that some of them, at least, would derive from earlier, disturbed and redeposited, layer 4 deposits. The general similarity in the range of material attributed to layers 3 and 4, and the hydration rim readings (Davidson 1975, p.37) suggest that material from these two layers should probably best be regarded as a single assemblage, broadly contemporary with the pits on the site.

On the other hand, layer 2 is shown everywhere as later than all pits, and with the rather doubtful exception of pits Q, R and S, not associated with pits at all. Although pit S is shown on Cross-section 3 as having a layer 2 fill, it is also shown as sealed by the main layer 2 deposit. The colour slide of the same section suggests that the fill of pit S is not significantly different from the layer 3 fill of the adjacent "pit" L. It therefore seems probable that pit S is the last occupation III feature in this part of the site. Reinterpretation of pit S and perhaps the very doubtful pit Q as part of occupation III, would remove one of the best arguments for continuity between occupations I to III on one hand, and occupation IV on the other, while strengthening the already strong argument for continuity in occupations I to III.

If the pits on the site are regarded as a single assemblage built over a period of time by people who adhered closely to a single site plan, some reinterpretation of occupations I, II, and III is necessary. The division into occupations was initially made by Parker on the basis of alignment, fills and intersections of structures, at a time when he was developing his thesis of cultural difference between occupation I (Archaic A) and occupation III (Archaic B).

One area where reinterpretation is possible is the nature and relationship of pits C and H. Cross-section 2 shows that there is no direct stratigraphic evidence

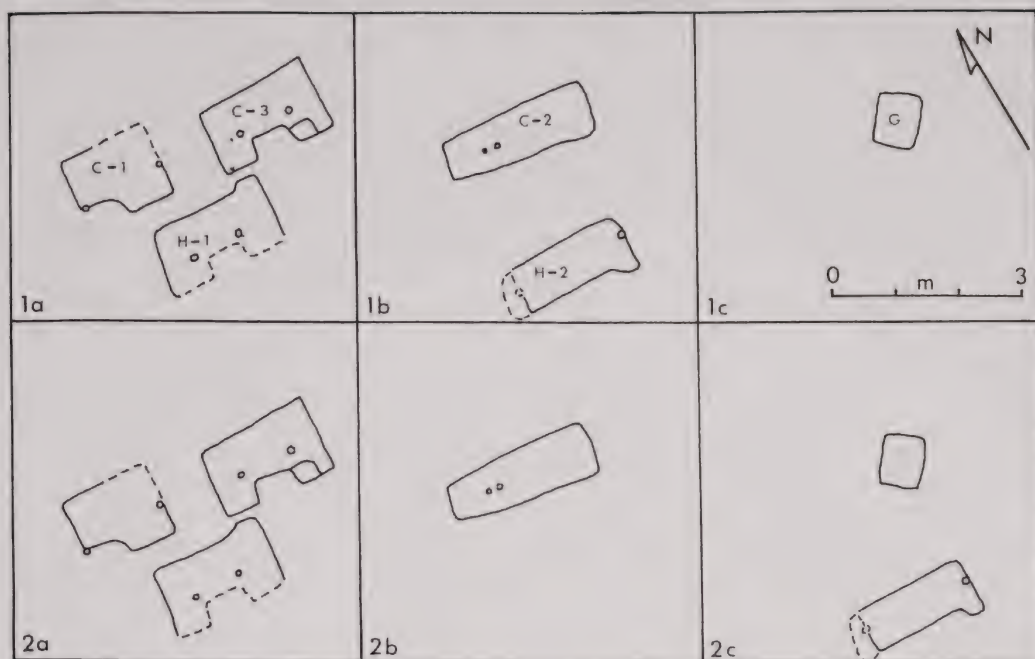


Fig. 3. Two hypothetical pit sequences, 1 a - c, 2 a - c, incorporating pits C-1, C-2, C-3, H-1, H-2 and G.

as to which, if either, of these structures is earlier, since both are cut through layer 4 and sealed by layer 3. Their relationship was therefore assessed from their fills, the fill of pit H being correlated with that of pit G, which was stratigraphically later than pit C. On other grounds, however, I believe another interpretation is possible. This assumes that both pit C and pit H are in fact more than one pit, a possibility which has already been suggested (Davidson 1975, pp.9 - 10, 14). A photograph of the north face of square E9 shows that if Pit C - 2 is separate from C - 1 it must be later. Unfortunately, Cross-section 2 does not extend right across pit H, and there is no photograph of this part of the section. However, photographs of pit H, after excavation, suggest that two small superimposed pits are involved. Study of the proportions and posthole patterns of the various occupation I pits leads me to believe that pit H may include remains of a small buttress pit, contemporary with Pits C - 1 and C - 3 (Fig. 3 — 1a, 2a), and a later plain rectangular pit, perhaps contemporary with either C - 2 (Fig. 3 — 1b) or G (Fig. 3 — 2c). These two alternatives are shown as hypothetical sequences in Fig. 3 (1a - c, 2a - c).

On the existing stratigraphic evidence, the “potholes” may well be the earliest features on the site. Clearly the question of their function, particularly whether they too could be for food storage, is important and deserves further consideration.

The complex of aligned pits, mostly with side buttresses, previously illustrated as occupation I (Davidson 1975, fig. 2), probably represents the next use of the site after the potholes. Possible modifications to this plan would be the reinterpretation of pits C and H, presented above; the possibility that a plain rectangular pit preceded the buttress pit F; and the always present possibility that the underground pits A and B are not truly associated with this occupation.

If the reinterpretation of pits C and H is accepted, there is little reason to postulate a separate occupation II. Rather it would seem that after the end of the useful life of the occupation I pits, pits of various sizes and shapes continued to be built in the same general alignment and positions throughout the build-up of layer 3, perhaps until the possibilities of this part of the site for pit building were exhausted, because of the increasing softness of the accumulating fill deposits.

The subsequent build-up of layer 2 may, as previously argued, represent merely a shift in use of this part of the site, at an even later stage in the same occupation, or a subsequent reoccupation after a period of abandonment. Only pit R is likely to have been associated with this reoccupation, and in the absence of a stratigraphic section including pit R, this too remains uncertain. On balance, the interpretation of layer 2 as later and distinct from the preceding group of occupations, now seems more attractive. In either case, it is probably safe to regard the portable material from layer 2 as a separate assemblage, distinct from that of the earlier layers.

CONCLUSION

Three cross-sections through key areas of Skipper's Ridge provide additional evidence for the interpretation of structural and portable remains. It seems likely that layers 3, 4 and 3/4 transitional, and the structures assigned to occupations I, II, and III, represent continuous or repeated occupation of the site by a community who adhered consistently to a single site plan, although varying the structures they constructed through time. The portable material found in these layers cannot, for the most part, be associated directly with any of these structures, nor confidently related to successive occupations. It should rather be regarded as a single assemblage broadly contemporary with the use of the site for pit construction.

On the other hand, the material from layer 2 probably does represent a separate and later assemblage, belonging to an occupation of a different character, with which only one pit, the rua R, is possibly associated.

REFERENCE

DAVIDSON, Janet M.

- 1975 The excavation of Skipper's Ridge (N40/7), Opito, Coromandel Peninsula, in 1959 and 1960. *Rec. Auckland Inst. Mus.* 12:1-42.